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AUTHOR	Bishop, Joe
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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger project investigating educational reform for democracy, 2 teachers and 34 students at 3 high schools in eastern Slovakia wrote down their opinions of the Roma (gypsies). The papers were classified as negative (N=20), neutral (N=14), and positive (N=2). Promoting democratic tolerance can be difficult, given the deeply held and primarily negative attitudes towards the Roma. Currently, students are required to take citizenship education courses in upper elementary and secondary school. However, students' school experience is the "memorize and regurgitate the knowledge" approach to education. Active teaching and learning processes are intended to promote tolerance, among other things, but Slovakia's curriculum is only slowly changing. When a cultural group devalues reading and writing as much as the Roma appear to do, and when schools operate under the assumption that literacy is knowledge, both oral knowledge and the culture of a people are devalued at the same time. To have a democracy, both Roma and Slovak alike should experience each other's approach. Bridging that gap could prove difficult in light of the entrenched prejudicial nature of Slovak views toward the Roma. On the other hand, the fact that there are times when Slovaks interact with "good Gypsies" suggests a promising direction for the future. It will take hard work on the part of Slovak educators, but the potential rewards that could ensue from such positive interactions would make that hard work worthwhile. (TD)

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Marginal Roamers Sedentarized: Slovak High School Student Views toward *Roma* (Gypsies).*

Presentation prepared for the 46th Annual meeting of the
Comparative and International Education Society,
Orlando, FL, 6-9 March 2002.

Joe Bishop
Assistant Professor
College of Education
Dakota State University
Madison, SD 57042

Email: joe.bishop@dsu.edu

[Now at Eastern Michigan University; jbishop@online.emich.edu]

Under communism, the Roma in the Slovak Republic, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, were sedentarized by the government. As part of a larger project investigating educational reform for democracy, secondary School students in Eastern Slovakia were asked to write what they thought about the Roma. Student responses were translated into English and analyzed to determine the range of views held by Slovak students toward the Roma. Suggestions are offered as to how Slovak schools might address these prejudicial views held by Slovak youth as well as how the Roma might more be offered a more equitable education.

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In Eastern Europe, it is not difficult to find a gypsy. The further east you travel, the more Roma you encounter. In particular, in the former state of Czechoslovakia, the communist government had a policy of pushing the eastward migration (field notes, 21 June 2002). More specifically, the government sedentarized a nomadic culture and provided large dwellings with enough space for larger families. Today, in larger Eastern Slovak cities and in other places, one can see the results of enforced settlement. Slovaks complain that the gypsies have destroyed the housing the government provided for them. And indeed they have certainly made significant alterations to the structures in the picture below, boarding up windows, living without running water or electricity, and heating with stoves.

Figure 1 Roma Apartment Building

A typical response of a Slovak to a situation such as that illustrated above, denigrates the Roma, casts them as animals, and seeks to eliminate them from the country. Certainly, this feeling is not universal; some few people do make positive statements as well as more neutral ones. For example, a university professor told me during a discussion of democracy and tolerance that as a child he had had Roma musicians as neighbors. They were of a ""higher caste; they were good people (field notes, 19 June 2002). A few minutes later, however, he told me that in his parents flat, when more Roma families move in, the value drops. He thought it was frightening. He noted that there are loud parties until 3 or 4 a.m., open windows, and human excrement outside the door. When asked why the neighbors did not step in, he stated that they fear retribution and broken windows, etc. He noted that Roma children use foul language – he is afraid to let his children play outside because Roma children are very aggressive. If you happen to see Roma children playing, you might notice them engaged in some sort of kick-boxing. In fact, one day there was a news report about a 2 year old Košice baby who had been hospitalilzed as a result of a beating received during play (field notes, 30 July 2002).

This does not appear to be confined to children—a Trnava man was hospitalized in a coma due to a beating allegedly conducted by gypsies. After emerging from his coma, he was paralyzed on the right side of his body (field notes, 30 July 2002). Young adults also experience

harassment from gypsies. As one high school student told me, when she used to take the train, Gypsies would touch her and ask her if she wanted to have sex (field notes, 1 August 2002). On the other hand, initial reactions toward the Roma by many Slovaks with whom I interacted was negative. Thus, due to a variety of inter ethnic tensions in the area, it seemed an appropriate step on the way to developing an indigenous anti-bias curriculum to examine the extant views toward the Roma held by the Slovak youth. Even at the University level studies of the Roma occur only at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. This study is confined to Bachelors (3 year) and Masters (5 year) major fields of study in culture work or social work "oriented on the Roma Community[1]."

As part of a larger investigation of conceptions of democracy, I asked students and teachers in 3 classrooms at 3 different schools in Eastern Slovakia to write down what they thought about the gypsies. Of 3 teachers, 2 responded; of 72 students, 34 responded. Approximately 70% of the participants were female and the rest were male. One female lived in a dorm which also housed Roma girls; another girl noted in her response that she was a gypsy girl. Most of the students (N=22) were aged 17; 5 were 16, another 5 were 18, and 1 was 20. The two female teachers were 25 and 32 years old. The definitions were examined and loosely classified into negative (N=20), neutral (N=14), or positive (N=2) statements in order to conduct the initial examination of the material presented in this paper.

The extreme negative stance is exemplified in the following quote written by a 17 year old female high school student:

> *Myslím si, že tak ľudi ako oni mali dať do plynových komôr namiesto židov. Nechcem byť surová, ale nič iné si nezaslúžia. Keby mali aspoň tu snahu správať sa aspoň trošku civilizovane, lenže oni vedia o tom aký sú a nesnažia sa zmeniť – (aspoň v spoločnosti) A potom hovoria, aký sú diskriminovaní a ako im tým ubližujeme. To je lenivý a sťahovavý národ. Ma proste taku krv, ale dá sa to potlačiť, keď sa chce. Dostali najlepšie vlastne najnovšie bloky ktoré sa postavili v Košiciach. Lenže im sa to nepáčilo. Oni sú ako svine, ktoré keď sú v čistom prostredí tak sa cítia nepohodlne. Vláda by mala s tým už niečo urobiť, lenže to asi veľa chcem. Nemala by dávať prídavky na deti do istého počtu deti napr. 3. Lenže nič také neexistuje a potom sa čudujeme, že sa tak množia. To je na dlhú debatu. Nedá sa to všetko napísať to treba predebatovať!*
>
> I think that people like them should be sent to the gas chambers instead of the Jews. I don't want to be tough, but they do not deserve anything else. If they had a tendency to behave at least a little bit as civilized beings, but they know how they behave and do not try to change themselves [at least in society]. Then they say that we hurt and discriminate against them. It is a lazy and wandering [migratory] nation. It has it in its blood, but it can be suppressed, if you want. In fact they got new flats that were built in Košice. But they did not like it. They are like pigs being in a clean environment they feel uncomfortable. The government should do something with this, but probably I want too much. It [the government] should give children's allowance only to a certain number of children, for example 3. But such a limit does not exist and then we wonder that they breed so much. This is for a long discussion. It cannot be written all,

[1] Daniela Drobná, Mária Guregová and Oľga Šubeníková. 1999. Vysoké Školy v Slovenskej Republike (Universities in the Slovak Republic). Bratislava, Slovak Republic: SAIA-SCTS.

it is necessary to discuss it

While the statement above may seem extreme due to its reference to the Nazi gas chambers, other negative statements display a similar sentiment. For instance, in this example from a 17 year old male, Roma are cast as animals:

> *Rómsky spoluobčania – žijú z našich daní. Radšej plodia deti, než aby mali pohnúť palcom. Žijú ako opice. Kradnú, bijú sa, množia sa ako potkany. Je to vážna hrozba, to množenie. Robia hanbu nášmu štátu v zahraničí. Sťažujú sa, že sú na nich páchané rasovo motivované útoky, ale to nie je pravda. Nie je to pravda. Stelesňujú obrovský problém, ktorý sa veľmi ťažko rieši.*
>
> Roma fellow-citizens – they live from our taxes [sponge]. They would rather bear children than work. They live like apes. They steal, fight and reproduce like rats. This reproduction is a serious threat. They make a bad reputation for our state abroad. They complain that racially motivated attacks are committed on them, but it is not true. They personify a great problem that is hard to solve.

Even the statements classified as neutral statements have something negative to say about some of the gypsies. For instance, a 16 year old female student recognized that Roma families are not all alike:

> *Čo si myslím o cigánoch? Sú rómske rodiny, ktoré sú poriadné, dobre vychované a čisté. Nemám rada cigánov, ktorí sú leniví, nechce sa im pracovať, nestarajú sa o deti a domácnosť. Na Slovensku majú cigáni veľkú výhodu. Nepáči sa mi to, že majú väčšiu potrebu ako normálny ľudia. Keď dostanú podporu (peniaze) všetko prepijú a prehrajú. Ak niečo ukradnú, všetko je im odpustené.*
>
> What do I think about gypsies? There are Roma families that are fair, well behaved and neat. I do not like gypsies, who are lazy, unwilling to work, and do not care about children and household. Here in Slovakia, they have a great advantage. When they get unemployment compensation, it is spent on alcohol and gambling. If they steal something, everything is forgiven.

With less detail, others, such as this 18 year old male student, note conditions on the response of others to the Roma people:

> *Ak Rómovia nebudú prepadávať, okrádať a ubližovať deťom, ženám, dôchodcom, určite im nikto nebude ubližovať.*
>
> If the Roma people do not raid, rob and hurt children, women, pensioners, definitely nobody will hurt them.

There were also a few neutral statements, such as that of this 25 year old female teacher, implying that the respondent was not suited to answering the question.

> *Rómska otázka u nás? Zložité .... , myslím, že to u nás nie je doriešené a vyžaduje to zvážiť iný prístup vhodné poradiť sa s iným štátom, ktorý má*

bohatšie skúsenosti, a kde to funguje.

Roma question here? Complicated, I think, here it is not solved and requests to consider different attitudes, Appropriate to advice with another state that has the richer experience, and where it works. Appropriate to advice with another state that has the richer experience, and here it works.

Some of the statements I collected had stronger positive elements, but sympathetic tendencies as in this 20 year old male's statement:

Rómovia to majú ťažké. Ich rodičia generácie do zadu boli zle vychovaný. Je ťažké to zmeniť. Som presvedčený že cez 50% Rómov v sebe skrýva umelecký fenomén. Ale sú tak vychovaný, že na to kašlú. A od nás necítia akúkoľvek podporu. Ja osobne nechcem mať deti, ale ak raz budem mať čas a peniaze adoptujem si s priateľkou jedného malého nádherného Róma.

Roma people are in a bad situation. Their parents [previous generations] were brought up badly. It is hard to change it. I am convinced that over 50% of Roma people hide an artistic phenomenon in them. But they are brought up in such a way that they do not care about it. And they do not feel any support from us. I, personally, do not want to have children, but if I have money and time, I, with my girlfriend, will adopt one handsome small Roma boy.

The most positive comment came from a 17 year old female (a self-proclaimed "gypsy girl"):

Na otázku Rómov čo povedať? Ja sama som Rómka študujem na Strednej škole myslím, že sa môžem rovnať k ostatným. Keď ste prišli do triedy stavím sa, že by ste vôbec nepovedali „tak ta je cigánka". Problém Rómov v čom spočíva jednoducho táto vláda sa nestará o ten problém. Cigánov jednoducho vysťahovali do osád, kde nie sú podmienky pre normálny život. Aký môže byť človek, ktorý nepozná WC, nepozná čo je to mať vodu v byte a pod. Čo by vy ste povedali úplne bežné veci potrebné pre normálny život. Je zbytočné im dať nové byty a pod. pretože človek ktorý normálne bežné veci nevidel nebude si ich ani vedieť vážiť. Preto si myslím, že hlavne sa dá tento problém riešiť osvetou. Ja sa preto môžem zaradiť do normálnej spoločnosti lebo som videla ten normálny spôsob života. Teraz viem, že musím vyštudovať nájsť si prácu, a pod. Viem, že nebudem mať deti už od 14 pretože sa to jednoducho nedá.

What to say about this question? I am a Roma girl, attending a high school and I think I can compare with others. If you come to our class, I bet you will not say. "So, she is a gypsy girl." The Roma people problem lies in the fact that the government does not care about this problem. They placed gypsies in settlements, where conditions are not normal living conditions. What sort of a man is he who does not know the WC [toilet, lit. water closet], does not know how it is to have water [running water] in a house, etc? Things you consider as necessary for normal life. It is useless to give them new flats and so on, because a man, who did not see normal common things, will not be able to appreciate them. Therefore I think it can be solved by enlightenment [further education]. I

can integrate into normal society because I saw the normal way of living. Now I know I have to study, find a job and so on. I know I will not have children at the age of 14, because it is just not possible.

While the sentiment expressed above applies to the toilet facilities described with the first picture, above, it equally applies to the facilities on the lower floor of a Roma apartment building I saw where the lower floors are used as toilets. I saw a group of young gypsy children lift the canvas tarps and urinate and defecate from the outside window sill. The apartment building is right next door to a parasitological research institute and across the street from the secondary school in front of which I stood to take the picture.

Figure 2 Roma Child Utilizing Toilet Facilities behind Tarpaulins

How does one create educational situations that promote democratic tolerance under situations of animosity such as those described in this paper? Currently, in the Slovak Republic, a country with barely more then a decade of recent experience as a democracy, students are required to take citizenship education courses in upper elementary and secondary school.

However, as the head of the Department of Ethic and Civic Education at Comenius University in Bratislava notes[2], the curriculum in the country is only slowly changing and students school experience is the memorize and regurgitate the knowledge approach to education. While the slow spread of active teaching and learning processes are intended to promote, among other things, tolerance,[3] given the deep and primarily negative attitude of young Slovak students and teachers toward the Roma, it seems necessary that something else must be done. In part, any experimental approach that creates situations for positive interaction between pupils of both ethnic groups is bound to have lasting effects. Unfortunately, given the fact that most Roma children either do not attend school, or experience their education in "special schools," it seems more important that the attitude of assimilating the Roma to the Slovak way of life ought seriously to be reevaluated.

When a cultural group devalues reading and writing as much as the Roma appear to do,[4] and when schools operate under the assumption that literacy IS knowledge, it devalues both oral knowledge and the culture of a people at the same time. To have a democracy, both Roma and Slovak alike should experience the approach of the other. Bridging that gap, unfortunately, could prove to be difficult to do in light of the entrenched prejudicial nature of Slovak views toward the Roma. Having witnessed Roma arguments apparently designed to distract crowds, attempted and successful thefts of wallets, and other similar actions directed against non-Roma people by gypsies, there seems to be some merit to some of the criticism of the Roma raised by the Slovaks. Having experienced situations in which Slovak attitudes toward the Roma are automatically tendered, there is no wonder that even a "good gypsy," as I have heard some gypsies called (they work, they don't steal, etc.), might be put off and as fearful of interacting with Slovaks as Slovaks are of interacting with the Roma. On the other hand, the fact that there are times when Slovaks interact with "good gypsies" suggests a promising direction for the future. Bridging that gap will take hard work on the part of Slovak educators, but the potential rewards that might ensue from such positive interactions would make that hard work worthwhile.

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[2] Erich Mistrík. 1999. "Citizenship Education in Slovak Education." Unpublished report, Comenius University, Bratislava. ERIC document (ED433268).

[3] Ibid, page 7.

[4] Isabel Fonseca. 1995. *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*. NY: Vintage Books.

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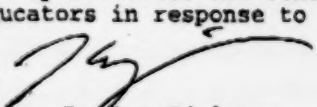
Signature: 

Position: Assistant Professor

Printed Name: J. Joe Bishop

Organization: Eastern Michigan University

Address: 314G Porter Building
EMU-TED
Ypsilanti, MI 48197

Telephone No: (734) 487-7120 x2644

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